

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 115 287

IR 002 835

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TITLE Research on the History of the American Library Association.
PUB DATE 30 Jun 75
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Library Association (94th, San Francisco, California, June 29-July 5, 1975)
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.76 HC-\$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *History; *Library Associations; Library Research; Organizational Development; Organizational Effectiveness; Research Needs; Speeches; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS ALA 75; *American Library Association

ABSTRACT

A researcher on the history of the American Library Association (ALA) describes problems encountered on his project, important trends in ALA, weaknesses and benefits of ALA, and needs in the area of historical research. Some of the problems cited are the inadequacy of organization and housing of the ALA archives, the unevenness of the archival materials, the researcher's status as an outsider, and lack of access to documents between 1958 and 1972. Among the current trends are: (1) unhappiness in the divisions related to ALA's tendency to be less responsive toward individuals; (2) greater concern with bread and butter issues; and (3) centralization of power in the hands of a few, generally establishment-oriented, individuals. Also cited are the weakness of ALA in the areas of democratic organization, library education, influence on the selection of Librarians of Congress, and publications. Benefits include ALA's role in raising the status of librarianship, pursuing foreign activities, and backing the concept of intellectual freedom. A need is seen for historical research in greater depth which may be pursued in dissertations, journal articles, and oral history projects. (LS)

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"RESEARCH ON THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION"

Speech given at ALA Conference, San Francisco,

June 30, 1975

Dennis Thomison

The work I have done on the history of the American Library Association was originally a doctoral dissertation completed at the Library School of the University of Southern California. That study covered the period from 1853 (when the Association was almost established) until the reorganization of 1957. As part of the Association's centennial celebration, I am now revising the work and bringing it up to 1972, the end of the David Clift tenure. The book is scheduled for publication in 1976. I might add that the revision and extension of the dissertation are being done at the request of ALA. I want to make that clear, because it bears on one of the problems that I will mention later on.

In this speech I would like to: discuss some of the problems I have encountered in this project; review some of the trends I feel are important; point out some of the weaknesses as well as the benefits of ALA; and finally, what I feel needs to be done in the area of historical research. Of course, these are all from a personal point of view.

First, the problems encountered in researching the history of the Association. (1) The primary problem in doing the

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doctoral dissertation was the archives of the ALA -- a misnomer if there ever was one. Until the recent move to the University of Illinois, the archives were in a warehouse on the waterfront, near Headquarters. The physical discomforts were the obvious ones: freezing in the winter and roasting in the summer, with only the lighting staying uniformly bad. Far more important of course was the disorganization of material. The lack of arrangement meant that every file, every folder, had to be gone through. Every letter, as a matter of fact, had to be at least hurriedly read. Since no copying machines were available, I had to copy by hand that which I thought to be important. For extremely long letters and especially documents which I thought might be unique, I microfilmed with my 35mm camera. This speeded up the process, but added its own problems later on. I do want to add that this description of the archives is definitely not a criticism of past or present librarians, because they have all urged greater concern for the archives.

(2) The second problem relates to the first. Since the archives have always been considered a poor stepchild (when they have been considered at all), the amount of material for a given year or particular incident varies tremendously. Either too much material or, more likely, not enough. ALA's participation in World War I, for example, is extremely well documented, as is the ill-fated revolt against FDR's selection of the Librarian of Congress in 1939. For the early years, at least, the preservation of material apparently depended on the president or

the secretary, because sometimes it appears as if every scrap of paper relating to a particular official will be included in the files. But these cases are very much the exception. What I am referring to, of course, is not the absence of major items, which would eventually show up in either the official minutes or in one of the journals. I am referring to the details, the meat on the bones, the personal comments which make the history of an organization a little more interesting and at times almost lively. Examples might be: the quiet resignation of an ALA president because he had been arrested for the embezzlement of public funds (a president, by the way, who has disappeared from the official list of presidents); or the attack of the Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania American Legion on the ALA for being a subversive organization; or the attempt by President-elect Kennedy to remove the Librarian of Congress; or the remark of a leading librarian, now dead, that retired librarians who complain too much ought to be chloroformed. While they may not be important items in the overall history of the ALA, I do think they are part of our story -- and they are not a part of the official record.

(3) The third problem is somewhat of a personal problem, but it probably would have been true of any other person working on a dissertation: that of being an "outsider" looking "in"; in other words, never having been actually involved in any official capacity in the ALA presents certain disadvantages. A person who has occupied a position in an organization for some time, without acquiring a vested interest, would be in a better situation to write authoritatively in some areas. This would not

have to be true, if the official record were complete, but needless to say, it seldom is complete. Therefore it seems impossible for me to escap criticism for being unaware of a problem or undercurrents, etc., which would not show up in the official record. In some cases I was aware of a problem or undercurrent but did not include it because I could not document it. I am thinking of antagonism towards Dewey -- towards Carl Milam -- towards David Clift. In some cases personal interviews and correspondence have helped, but very often people do not want to be quoted on personal or controversial matters.

(5) The final problem I would like to mention relates only to the post-dissertation period, 1958-1972 ---- the period of time which I was asked to add on by the ALA. For the earlier period I have related to you the difficulties of doing research in the archives. I can only assume that the files at Headquarters are in better condition. Assume, because I was not allowed to look in even one folder, one file. The decision by Mr. Wedgeworth to refuse access to the files surprised me, to say the least. Unfortunately, his decision was upheld by the Executive Board. Library Journal, in its annual list of awards, gave the ALA its Watergate Freedom of Access Award --- for hiring a historian to write its history, and then denying him permission to use the files to obtain the information. I do think that it is ironic that biographers and historians were allowed to see the

skeletons in the closets of Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller, Standard Oil, and the New York Times --- but apparently this organization, which presumably has nothing to hide from its members cannot take such a chance. What Mr. Wedgeworth offered as an alternative was for me to request specific files, which would then be copied and sent to me. The first and only request I have made took six weeks to receive. The item which I wanted was the record of an executive session, with no other information available to me. The file which I received contained two newspaper clippings, a reprint from the Congressional Record, and two unimportant letters. At this rate, and using the approved methodology, an historian could be writing on the first centennial when the second hundred years came along.

Trends

I would next like to discuss some of the trends I have noticed during the period covered. I am sure there is nothing new or revealing in this list, and the items are essentially personal observations. (1) First, the Association has had a long history of unhappiness in the various divisions, which, it seems to me, will eventually lead to an unavoidable split --- spinoffs, if we can use business terminology. Traditional accommodations will not work forever. As an organization grows and becomes more all-encompassing, the less relevant it probably becomes to the individual member. In its desire to serve everyone, it becomes less responsive to the individual -- less responsive to social change, for example. To be otherwise would

be dangerous to the organization, because too many people would become disgruntled. The smaller organizations retain membership loyalties because the members have more in common. In the past there was first talk of need for greater autonomy, then the term "umbrella organization" became popular. In time, for a few member organizations, I think the end result will be complete independence.

(2) I think that there has been a decided trend towards concern with the so-called bread and butter issues, possibly at the expense of intellectual and moral issues. It is too bad, because the Association's concern with some moral issues came rather late. It seems to me that the movement towards more concern with salaries, working conditions, etc., comes not necessarily because the organization thinks it should be doing this but possibly because it has had to. The same pressures which forced the NEA and the AAUP in these directions are at work here.

(3) The third is more of a condition than a trend, because it has been true throughout most of ALA's history: I am referring to the centralization of power in the hands of a few -- likely to be older, and certainly well-established librarians. In general I would say that the organization has seldom provided a comfortable home for the young Turk. While in its younger days the ALA was occasionally called liberal, radical, and even "pinkish" -- I am sure that a balanced judgment would be

towards a conservative line, and in the past this has related to the age of the leadership, and the tendency of the leadership to stay in office for a long time. A number of years ago an officer of the Association resigned with this blunt criticism:

First, the ALA is an old organization; that is, its policies and practices are controlled by old people. Secondly, the ALA is a bureaucracy in itself, dominated by members of other bureaucracies. Thus, ALA can consider all issues and place precedence on none. We are marvelously able to ignore the climate of membership opinion, to alter policies without seeming to...ALA is remarkably resistant to policy change.

The distance between the individual member and the decision-making process has often been so far that it would seem to have been beyond hope. Rebellions, such as that against the attempted selection of Carl Milam as president, after he had resigned as Executive Secretary, have actually been very few in number and usually not successful. However, I would have to say that there has been a marked improvement in recent years in getting some "new blood." But it is a slow process, and I think we all have a tendency to turn to people we know rather than taking a chance on someone new.

Weaknesses

(1) It seems to me that the most important criticism of ALA has been its lack of democracy during much of the period studied. Different terms could be used, such as oligarchy -- and even monarchy at certain times --but a democratic organization it has not been. That may or may not be important,

depending on your own point of view. But it has been very much of a bureaucracy, and a bureaucracy which has frequently lost touch with the membership.

(2) Secondly, the Association has never really gained control over education for librarianship -- specifically, admission to the profession. And that may well become the most significant failure of all. The Committee on Accreditation hasn't done it, and doesn't show any signs of doing it. The library schools won't, and probably can't control it. This is a very dangerous weakness, even if the present employment situation is only temporary.

(3) The next weakness concerns the selection of the Librarian of Congress, often thought of as the pinnacle of librarianship-- but a position not usually held by a professional librarian. After almost 100 years of trying, we cannot really say that we have made any headway in attempting to convince either the executive or legislative branch that the ALA should have a significant input in the selection process. The only real success the Association has had was in the selection of Herbert Putnam back in 1899, and he probably would have been selected even if there had been no ALA.

(4) Although the ALA has done a great deal to raise the public's estimation of librarianship, it has never been able to convince the public that we are necessary. Good, maybe, but not necessary. How else can we explain our low priority, the

fact that libraries are hit first in cutbacks, and the failure of so many bond issues? Obviously, I am not suggesting that the ALA is alone responsible for this failure. But as the major professional organization in our field, it must certainly bear a major share of the responsibility.

Benefits

It is easier to criticize than to praise, but I would like to mention some of the real benefits we have derived from the ALA over the years. Needless to say, these are not the only benefits which might be mentioned. (1) As I said earlier, the organization has done a great deal to make people aware of libraries and librarianship. This was very important work during the early years of the ALA. Furthermore, through the process of accreditation, much has been done to raise the standards as far as education is concerned. (2) Although not a major effort now, the Association has in the past achieved much at the international level. Foreign libraries and library schools were at one time established and maintained with an almost missionary zeal. (3) And the last major benefit I want to mention is in the area of intellectual freedom, because I think a great contribution has been made by the ALA. Although I have a hunch, based on reading a great deal of correspondence, that many librarians did not really believe in it, the progress which has been made can to a large extent be traced to the efforts of the Association. There are, of course, many other benefits, but I really don't think that this group needs to be reminded of them.

Historical Research

Finally, I would like to briefly mention some of the things I believe needs to be done in the area of historical research. (1) I would like to see additional histories completed concerning the Association: its components and the people who have made major contributions. This at the doctoral and post-doctoral level, and resulting in publications. It would obviously mean encouragement of more historical research by the library schools. (2) I would like to see more, and better, journal articles -- in more journals. When we think of historical articles, we tend to think of a very few journals, and I do not see why this should be the case. Why shouldn't the major journals be more concerned with historical material of a high quality? ((3) I would like to see a major oral history project get under way, concerning the history of the ALA, before it is too late. I know that Dr. Jessie Shera has proposed such a project, to be funded through the Association, but as far as I know, he has not been successful in getting the necessary money. I do think that we as librarians should be more concerned with our own history, and I project such as this could be tremendously important.

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